

# Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to "Arts and Africa".

MUSIC - MOTYANI QUYE

## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

This is the memorable music of the most celebrated of the performers of the Bagamoyo College of Art in Tanzania. His name? Hukwe Zawose. Only last year he played for us when the Bagamoyo musicians came over to Britain.

MUSIC - MOTYANI QUYE

## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And it was on that visit last year that this record was cut. We'll be playing other music from other performers from it later in the programme. And we're paying a visit to the Africa Centre Art Gallery here in London where a rather extraordinary exhibition is taking place.

Ethiopia today is photographed and filmed as a land of famine. The photographs in the exhibition show an earlier, happier face - rivers are full of water, healthy children are playing, the people look proud and assured. It's good to be reminded of the true nature of the country. Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam is shown with notable visitors as is the late Emperor Haile Selassie - not a surprise when you learn that the photographer, Shemelis Desta served as the court and personal photographer to the Emperor and as press photographer to both him and to the present Head of State. What's on show is only a small part of his thousands of official and prize-winning photographs taken over many years. Indeed, when Patrick Gilkes who's lived and taught in Addis Ababa and Producer Florence Akst were shown round the exhibition by Ato Shemelis the first picture to catch their eyes was more than twenty years old.

## PATRICK GILKES

What we've got here are some considerable surprises in terms of Africa's heads of state. There are people that one knows straight away like Nasser and, of course, Haile Selassie and Nkrumah, but there are one or two that I must say I found extremely difficult to recognise because, well, I suppose the photographs were taken really quite a long time ago and particularly President Nyerere of Tanzania, its a very good photograph but I wouldn't actually have recognised it. Ato Shemelis, when actually did you take these photographs?

SHEMELIS DESTA

I took these photographs in 1963 when the African Conference was held in Ethiopia.

PATRICK GILKES

The first session of the Organisation of African Unity?

SHEMELIS DESTA

The first session of the O.A.U.

PATRICK GILKES

So that's twenty one, twenty two years old. Yes, President Nyerere really does look a lot younger. And that must be.....?

SHEMELIS DESTA

Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa of Nigeria.

PATRICK GILKES

It really is fascinating to see pictures like this. Here we've got, I notice, the Shah of Iran and Haile Selassie and that's a photograph which really has a sense of history about it because, of course, the Shah has gone and Haile Selassie has gone. This is one of the things one does notice, a lot of the people you photograph have, of course, disappeared, they've died or they've been overthrown.

SHEMELIS DESTA

No, no, most of them, the Queen and Castro are still there in power.

PATRICK GILKES

Yes, I must say I was very interested to see the pictures of Castro and Kosygin with Colonel Mengistu as well. Were those taken in the Palace in Addis Ababa too?

SHEMELIS DESTA

Yes, at a banquet in the Palace.

PATRICK GILKES

When Castro visited Ethiopia?

SHEMELIS DESTA

Yes. And when Kosygin visited Ethiopia.

PATRICK GILKES

Oh yes they're both drinking champagne. Oh, here they are sitting watching, what, the Revolution Day Parade?

SHEMELIS DESTA

The Revolution Day Parade, yes in Revolution Square.

FLORENCE AKST

Here are some letters of appreciation. This is in Amharic, what does it say?

SHEMELIS DESTA

That one His Majesty wrote for me when I show an exhibition of my photographs in Africa Hall. He opened the exhibition and he signed this for me.

PATRICK GILKES

And this one underneath?

SHEMELIS DESTA

And underneath there is President Bokassa of the C.A.R., when he was in Ethiopia for the conference.

PATRICK GILKES

Oh, and here's Hubert Humphrey from America too.

FLORENCE AKST

It looks there as though he made the Emperor laugh aloud. Did you wait for the Emperor to laugh before you photographed it?

SHEMELIS DESTA

Yes, I always was watching his eye, watching everything you know.

FLORENCE AKST

So you always have to watch for the right moment?

SHEMELIS DESTA

Yes, always, always especially in the Palace.

PATRICK GILKES

I imagine he was very careful about what he wanted you to photograph?

SHEMELIS DESTA

Yes, very much.

PATRICK GILKES

He didn't like being photographed in unguarded moments?

SHEMELIS DESTA

No.

PATRICK GILKES

In a way the most interesting part of this exhibition isn't photographs just of the Emperor and historical documents and so on, though obviously they are very interesting but I think I must say I find in a way the most interesting part are these pictures of the various women from various parts of Ethiopia and the dress sense that they have and the photographs, really, of the people. I realise Ato Shemelis, you were a court photographer, but I do think, in some ways, your best photographs are not pictures of the people.

FLORENCE AKST

What areas are they from? Do you recognise all the areas, Patrick?

PATRICK GILKES

Well I don't, though I think I'll be fairly quick to say that the most attractive probably is the girl on the left there, who is, I think, Adari from Harar Province. They are supposed to be the most beautiful girls in Ethiopia, though I think I should be careful about this since my wife actually comes from another part of the country.

FLORENCE AKST

Would you like to describe what the photograph shows? It is a colour photograph.

PATRICK GILKES

This is a colour photograph of an Adar girl carrying a basket with grain or bread on her head and she's got a shawl wrapped round her face and then draped over her shoulders in a vivid yellow colour; gold, really shining in the sun and she's framed by her own headscarf which is pink and behind, with the rest of the colours in the market in Harar town, there are blues and gold and other colours in soft focus behind her.

FLORENCE AKST

Yes, I love the blurred colours because it makes you concentrate on the one face amongst the many.....

PATRICK GILKES

Which really stands out and with some beautiful white teeth.

FLORENCE AKST

This young lady has some very white teeth, but the colours are only gray and white, did you choose to photograph this girl in black and white or would you have used colour if you'd had it?

SHEMELIS DESTA

I chose black and white. I like black and white photographs more than colour because it gives me satisfaction when I print it. I enjoy it, I like it very much, that's why I took this girl specially in black and white.

PATRICK GILKES

But don't you find that colour sometimes adds another dimension to the photograph?

SHEMELIS DESTA

Well, sometimes, yes.

PATRICK GILKES

Some of the photographs obviously are very beautiful in black and white, but I would feel that sometimes the colour of the clothes, of the bead-work, of the jewellery comes out more when you have colour.

FLORENCE AKST

Looking across at the other side of the hall where there are a lot of photographs of animals and there are girls playing, it looks to me as though it's easier for you to tell me what I must look at when you photograph in black and white. When you photograph in colour this girl here - she's got a very colourful shawl, about four different colours, and then she's got a lot of cloth on her head which is another range of colours - I find it quite difficult to look at her. I notice the colours which are so strong.

SHEMELIS DESTA

Well, I have taken this photograph of the girl only for the colour of the dress. I'm interested not in her face, I'm interested in the clothes and the different colours.

FLORENCE AKST

And so you're making me look at the colour?

SHEMELIS DESTA

Yes.

FLORENCE AKST

We've moved along to the last group of photographs which show ordinary people, anonymous people, I think, just glimpsed at a moment in their lives. The first one is very impressive. Here's an old man. You've won prizes with this?

SHEMELIS DESTA

Yes with this photograph I won a prize twice, one in the Soviet Union in 1964 the other one in Lebanon in 1967.

FLORENCE AKST

It shows an old man sitting down holding his head and with his elbow resting on a stick and the straight line of his arm drawing your eyes to his head and his closed eyes. Why was it a prize-winner?

SHEMELIS DESTA

Well this is an old man and he's tired and it is a very sunny day. He's thinking, that's why I have taken this particular photograph.

FLORENCE AKST

Yes, you can tell he is thinking and that he's not asleep. It's quite clear isn't it?

SHEMELIS DESTA

Yes.

FLORENCE AKST

And is this a favourite of yours? Do you like this one best?

SHEMELIS DESTA

Yes, but not only this one. I have many favourite photographs.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

A remarkable collection of photographs by Shemelis Desta who, I understand, takes only one shot with his camera so it has to be exactly right at the first go.

Now for that Bagamoyo music. Triple Earth Records of London took the opportunity of the group's visit to London to record them and to issue the disc as their first African recording. So little traditional music from Africa is recorded here that we'd like to congratulate Triple Earth on their enterprise by playing some more. Here's a song from Basil Mbatia in praise of a beautiful girl called Zaina.

MUSIC - ULELE MWANA LELO ZAINA

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And now I'm taking my leave of you for today and handing over to Joyce Mioto and the other Bagamoyo musicians so from me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey it's goodbye.

MUSIC - KALANDA KATUZANA